

Training the Trainers: A Call for Change in Combat Engineer Professional Military Education

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Training the Trainers: A Call for Change in Combat
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The Staff Noncommissioned Officer has traditionally been called the "Backbone of the Marine Corps." The reason for this is twofold. First, it has been the SNCO's role to assist the commander in all administrative matters and the training of junior Marines. Second, the SNCO provides counsel and advice to both officers and enlisted Marines based on their professional knowledge and experience (emphasis added).

-The Role of the Marine SNCO. TBS student handout.

Introduction

The ability to answer the call, "Engineers Up!" has been the hallmark of the Marine engineer since his forefathers fought through the battlefields of Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima. Whether it consists of breaching a minefield, building a base camp or leveling a road, supported commanders can always count on the engineers to accomplish the mission. However, as engineers rotate through each major subordinate element (MSE) of the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) and promotions come more in line with other services, an experience drain is forming that threatens the engineers' ability to answer the MAGTF's call. The engineer staff sergeant, the lynchpin that holds

the engineer bridge together, is most adversely affected by these changes. Due to the criticality of the engineer platoon sergeant billet, the Marine Corps must expand the education of the engineer Staff Non-Commissioned Officer (SNCO) and create an engineer unit leaders course.

CAREER PROGRESSION

Rotation through each MSE denies Marines the opportunity to specialize in any one area of Marine engineering. This "well rounding" of Marine engineers has several positive effects such as a better understanding of MAGTF operations and a greater appreciation of how engineers affect the various MSEs. However, this well rounding comes at a price, specifically at the SNCO supervisory level, where the platoon sergeant is expected to be the resident expert within that platoon. The platoon sergeant's duties are many and they vary considerably in each MSE. For instance, an engineer within the division will focus mainly on mobility, counter-mobility, and on general engineering. The supported unit is an infantry battalion, and in many cases the platoon is attached or is in direct support of this battalion. Common tasks include breaching minefields, urban mobility breaching, obstacle construction and engineer reconnaissance. In contrast, an

engineer unit in a Marine Wing Support Squadron (MWSS) has different duties. Their supported unit is either a fixed or rotary wing squadron. Consequently, common tasks include rapid runway repair (RRR), establishing cantonment areas, and constructing expedient airfields. Few MOS skills overlap between these two units, yet an engineer is expected to transition between the two.

Furthermore, a concurrent reduction in experience level exacerbates the problem. Marines receive promotions more quickly due to the Corps' attempt to bring its promotion rates in line with the other services. Despite wearing the same rank insignia, a significant difference exists between a Marine promoted to SSgt with six years time in service vice a Marine with twelve years time in service. As any Marine can attest, the problem associated with 2ndLts does not usually rest with their intellect but with their lack of experience. The same is true of any Marine who is thrust into a leadership position without having learned any lessons through experience. The difference between 2ndLts and SSgts is that the SSgt is responsible for training the 2ndLt and making the new officer's learning period as rigorous yet as painless as possible; however, when the SSgt cannot perform this duty

due to his own lack of experience, unnecessary friction results and combat readiness decreases.

However, the current educational track for engineers is insufficient to meet this new reality. When Marine engineers received promotions to SSgt with nine-twelve years time in service (TIS) and five years time in grade (TIG), the Corps did a good job of preparing them for the demands of the platoon sergeant billet, yet that is no longer the case. The TIG requirement for promotion to SSgt fell from 5.92 years in 1996 to just 1.83 years in 1997. The average TIG requirement for the last eight years is 2.96 (Chart 1).¹ Promotion zones and rates are determined by HQMC and are beyond the scope of this paper. These numbers are used only to demonstrate that the education derived from experience has been lost and has not been offset with appropriate school house education. The professional development for engineers has not changed to compensate for this deficiency.

The educational track for engineers is similar to that of other MOSs. Aspiring engineers attend the seven week basic engineer course at Marine Corps Engineer School (MCES) at Camp Lejuene, NC. There, they receive the entry

¹ Time in Grade is determined by the difference between junior date of rank (JDOR) for promotion period and first promotion opportunity (Oct 1 of calendar year). For example in 1997 the JDOR was 12/1/95 and promotions began on Oct 1, 1997, thus 1 year and 10 months (or 1.83 years) TIG.

level training required to earn the 1371 MOS. The course consists of instruction in demolitions, land mine warfare, and wood frame and timber construction.² The combat engineer non-commissioned officers (CENCO) course is the next level of resident professional military education (PME) available to the engineer. The course consists of instruction in engineering subjects relating to mobility, counter-mobility, survivability, and general engineering. Instruction includes: reconnaissance, engineer equipment, bridging, demolitions, mine warfare, obstacles, field fortification, horizontal and vertical construction, and management techniques.³ As the name implies, the Marine Corps designed this course for the engineer NCO at the team and squad leader levels. Engineer Operations Chiefs' course (EOC) provides the final resident MOS specific PME. Instruction is focused on the planning and supervisory aspects of engineering operations.⁴

Attendance beyond the basic course is neither mandatory nor tied to promotion. As a result, attendance levels for the CENCO and Chiefs courses are predictably low. Marines have no incentive other than personal initiative to attend these courses, and while that should

² http://www.lejeune.usmc.mil/mces/CEIC/BCE_04.htm

³ http://www.lejeune.usmc.mil/mces/CEIC/CEN_04.HTM

⁴ http://www.lejeune.usmc.mil/mces/EOC_04.htm

be enough to ensure maximum participation, it is not. Commanders unwilling to "lose" their Marines to school for several weeks only compound the problem.

THE SOLUTION

The Marine Corps needs to establish an engineer unit leaders' course (EULC) to ensure that MAGTF commanders receive timely and effective engineer support. MCES, with guidance and oversight from Training and Education Command (TECOM), will be the lead agency in establishing the curriculum. The EULC will focus on preparing SSgts to fill the billet of platoon sergeant within each MSE. This idea is not new, nor is it uniquely engineer. The infantry community realized several years ago that the demands placed on the SSgt were too numerous not to address without formal education. The result is the infantry unit leaders course (IULC). This is the primary resident PME for all 03XX SSgts.⁵ The feeder MOSs for the 0369 MOS encompass the entire 03 community, with the 0369 expected to lead any

⁵Maradmin 166/04 *Resident Professional Military Education Credit For the Infantry Unit Leaders Course*. 9 Apr 2004.

infantry unit at the platoon or section level. The IULC addresses the eight billets encompassing the 0369 MOS.⁶

The engineer community is similar to the infantry in that the 1371 MOS encompasses many different billets to include: breach force commander, route clearance team leader, demolitions team leader, machine gun section leader, anti-armor section leader, construction crew leader, RRR team leader, and so on. While the 1371 MOS remains the same, the necessary skills area for each billet varies considerably. Creating an MOS for each billet is not recommended, as the EULC provides a more manageable solution.

Although the table of organization (T/O) lists a 1371 GySgt as the platoon sergeant, pro-share restrictions on engineer units limit the amount of GySgts available to fill this position. This billet is typically filled by a 1371 SSgt, or even a Sgt. The individual training standards (ITS) manual lists 21 ITSs for a 1371 GySgt.⁷ Due to the SSgt filling the billet of GySgt, the distinction between grades becomes irrelevant as the SSgt is expected to

⁶ Rifle platoon sergeant, machine gun section leader, anti-armor platoon sergeant, 60mm mortar section leader, anti-tank section leader or heavy machinegun platoon sergeant.

⁷ Marine Corps Order 10.95A, *Individual Training Standards (ITS) System For Engineer, Construction, and Equipment Occupational Field (OCCFLD)* 13. 25 Jan 00. p 15.

execute all of the GySgt specific ITSs. The T/O should not be changed; however, SSgts need training to accomplish these tasks- CENCO course does not do this.

The EULC should be the primary resident PME for 1371 SSgts. While the resident SNCO Academy Career Course provides valuable education in leadership, administration, and other non-MOS specific subjects; however, engineer SSgts need advanced engineer skills training between the CENCO and Chief's course levels⁸. SSgts attending EULC will still be encouraged to attend the resident career course (similar to captains who complete expeditionary warfare school distance education program and still attend resident school). Completion of the SNCO Career Distance Education Course would be mandatory for being certified PME complete.

EULC has to be mandatory to ensure proficiency throughout the MOS, and the only tool available is correlating attendance to promotion. All 1371 SSgts and SSgt selects will be required to attend this course within two years of promotion to SSgt to be eligible for promotion to GySgt. This may seem a draconian measure of ensuring participation, but the current paradigm of voluntary attendance does not meet the intent of enlisted PME or the

⁸ <http://www.mcu.usmc.mil/sncoa/Quantico/career.cfm>

needs of the Corps. Commanders who are unwilling to allow their SSgts to attend EULC will no longer have an option. Of course exceptions will need to be made on an individual basis, but this waiver should be granted only when deployment cycles, family emergencies and other serious issues prevent the Marine from attending within the required two year period. To better track completion and ensure compliance, reporting seniors will be required to annotate (non)completion on the SSgt's fitness report.

CHALLENGES

The EULC provides the best opportunity to achieve the goals of PME by offering a robust engineer specific curriculum to those Marines in between deployments or returning to the operating forces from a B-billet. Current and future operational tempo (Optempo) will provide significant challenges in ensuring our Marines attend resident PME. ALMAR 035/04 waives the PME requirement for the FY 04 gunnery sergeant and staff sergeant selection boards due to increased Optempo.⁹ By publishing this ALMAR, HQMC is acknowledging the continued negative impact that

⁹ ALMAR 35/04, *Policy On Professional Military Education (PME) Requirements For FY05 USMC And USMCR Selection Boards And Meritorious Promotions* 29 Jun 04.

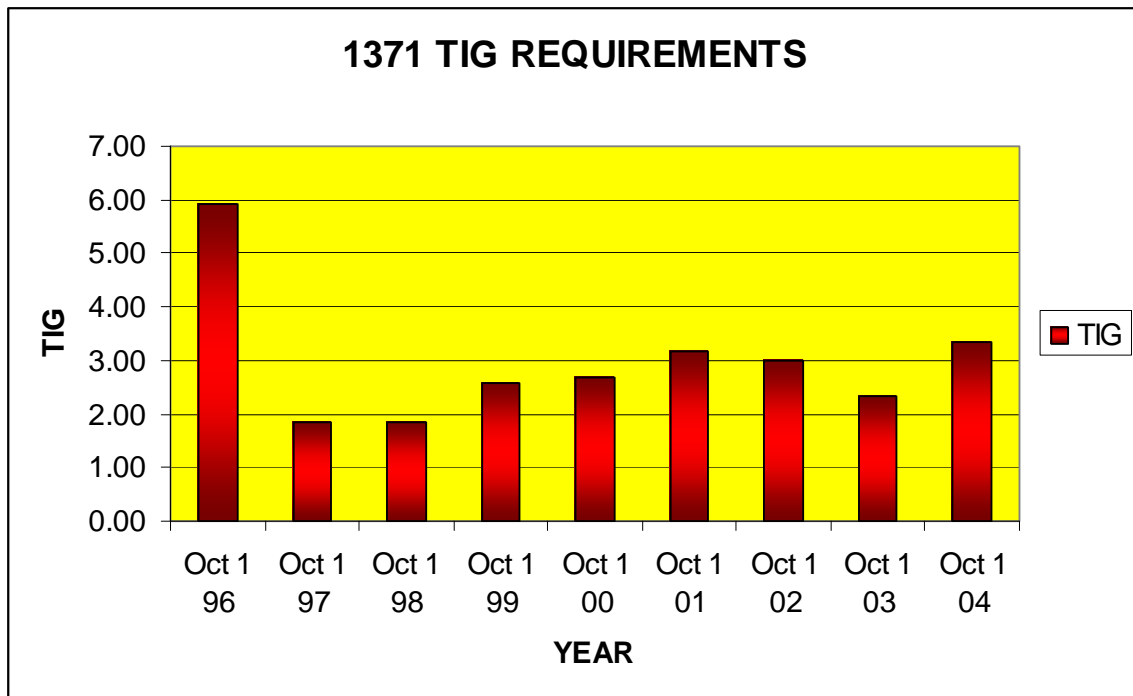
the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) is having on SNCOs' education.

Add to this, the EULC will not demand a significant increase in fiscal or training and transit (T2) requirements. The seven weeks necessary to attend the SNCOA Career Course provides the benchmark for the EULC. By replacing the Career Course with EULC, the commander has no net increase in T2 days. Additionally, by attending the EULC rather than the EOC course, which is available to SSgts and is nine weeks long, T2 days are reduced by two weeks. By reducing the number of EOC courses and replacing them with EULC, the staff and facilities at MCES would be adequate to offer the EULC with no net increase in training dollars. This is a broad look at the T2 and fiscal situation and the Marine Corps needs to conduct a more thorough analysis, yet the initial assessment is positive.

Education is paramount in ensuring the success of the Marine Corps on the battlefields of both today and in the future. SNCOs will continue to train our officers and enlisted Marines in how to become experts in their MOS. The Marine Corps needs to train the trainers and arm the SNCO with all the tools available to succeed in this mission. The engineer unit leaders' course is the solution the

engineer community needs in providing the MAGTF with superior engineer support now and in the future.

Chart 1



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